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Visitor Learning: In the Polar Bear Capital of the World

Submission for: Paper in Concurrent Session

Introduction and Literature

This paper will discuss the visitor experience, design, and measurement when comparing in-situ and ex-situ nature-based tourism case studies. Particularly, this presentation will address the methods used to learn more about the social dynamics that help facilitate visitor learning and how to plan for particular types of visitor experiences. This research will also discuss the effect of place, authenticity and the importance of sustainable and responsible tourism in experiential visitor learning.

Tourism to ecologically sensitive areas, such as the Canadian Arctic, is often regarded as a way for people to learn about environmental issues such as climate change, as well as connect with and care about remote polar communities, the northern environment and the people that live there (Ballantyne & Packer, 2005; Falk, Ballantyne, Packer, & Benckendorff, 2012). However, travel to in-situ destinations that are remote or ecologically sensitive is frequently critiqued as exacerbating environmental problems due to the large carbon footprint created in travelling to these locations (Dawson, Stewart, Lemelin, & Scott, 2010; Gossling, 2013). The terms in-situ and ex-situ simply mean on-site and not on-site, respectively. These terms are often used when discussing conservation, as ex-situ sites (such as zoos) and are often argued to be important places for in-situ (such as a conservation area or park) species conservation. In the case of nature-based tourism, there remains the question of the impact of visiting an in-situ destination versus an ex-situ site. As there is little empirical evidence to inform what the differences may exist between these two experiences in relation to environmental education and learning, visitor experience, and impact on the communities. Research is needed to understand these phenomena and inform best practices for both in-situ and ex-situ nature-based tourism experiences.

This paper will focus on practical lessons learned from my dissertation research. It will address what kinds of learning were found in the in-situ and ex-situ case studies, and will provide insight into how polar tourism destinations can plan effective visitor experiences that achieve communities' desired learning outcomes.

Methods

As part of my dissertation research, this comparative case study research examines nature-based tourism experiences and learning in both Churchill, Manitoba, a northern Canadian town (in-situ) and the Assiniboine Park Zoo's Journey to Churchill exhibit (ex-situ) in Winnipeg, Manitoba, which is intended to represent the wildlife, ecosystems, and element of the town of Churchill. Churchill is known as the "polar bear capital of the world" and is already experiencing visible effects of climate change (Dawson et al., 2010). This longitudinal multi-site case study used qualitative methods to explore different types of visitor learning and sustainable behaviour change outcomes at both sites. The methods used in this study included observations, personal meaning maps, and open-ended interviews. Through the use of these methods the social and physical (place-based) context of visitor learning can be identified and discussed in greater detail. The similarity of the cases, as well as the polar bears as the common medium for which to communicate climate change messages makes these case studies interesting and an excellent example of different forms of in-situ and ex-situ learning that are possible for a nature-based tourism contexts. The longitudinal aspect of this research also provides important insights into methods appropriate for post-visit research and provides examples of the types of data possible using different qualitative research methods.

Findings

The case study data demonstrates the importance of the social dynamics in nature-based tourism learning. In particular, the guide / interpreter's ability to tell personalized narratives proved to be invaluable for visitors to connect to both the place and the people who live in the community. The social dynamics within the groups and the activities that facilitated interaction and built a sense of community were also an important social components of visitor learning. For example, one visitor described how they spent an evening curling (a popular Canadian sport) with their fellow tourists and that this casual interaction with locals had been a significant part of that experience. Social dynamics were also important for ex-situ nature-based tourism learning, but more in relation to the social dynamics of a visitor's own group of family. For example, visitors were found to act as a facilitator in the learning experience of their children or grandchildren.

For the in-situ visitor experience first-hand accounts that underscored the lack of sea ice and supported the scientific evidence presented by the guides about the effects of climate change was found to help visitors realize the urgency and importance of the impact that climate change is having in Churchill. Further, the concern that guide's / interpreters expressed, in that their own children may not get to be a part of polar bear tourism in the future, was another way that visitors understood the urgency climate change. Through understanding their guide's / interpreter's experiences visitors can see how climate change is impacting the tourism industry and the community that relies on it from both an economic and social perspective. For ex-situ visitors, learning about these issues was influenced rather by first hand encounters and connections made with individual polar bears and the narratives of climate change that interpreters or zoo keepers provided. In the ex-situ experience the impact and connection to the community (both in-situ and ex-situ) was less visible, and depended heavily on the narrative or lack of narrative as provided by the interpreters or zoo keepers.

The longitudinal aspect of this research also provides additional insight into how visitors made memories and what was most poignant and remained in the forefront of their minds two months after their on-site visit.

Conclusion

This presentation provides insight into the different types of visitor learning possible in both in-situ and ex-situ sites. This research also provides evidence of different types of social dynamics that are important in visitor learning and connection building through nature-based tourism experiences. Finally, this research demonstrates several qualitative methods appropriate for analyzing nature-based tourism that promotes sustainable and authentic tourism experiences via experiential learning both on-site and post-visit.

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